

STOP-LOOK-LISTEN
John 3:1-8
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It was late in the afternoon on the day of the Sabbath.
Nicodemus, Pharisee, ~~respectable and~~ respected civic figure,
religious leader, legal expert, did something which endangered
his career, certainly his reputation, perhaps even his life.
With his friend Joseph, he went to the Governor, Pontius Pilate
and asked for the body of an executed rabble-rouser, Jesus of
Nazareth. Pilate, somewhat relieved - one has to assume - to
have at least one detail handled by someone else - quickly
consented. And Nicodemus and Joseph - I picture them ^{as} middle
aged, ^{men slightly} paunchy, with more than a little gray in their beards,
picked up the ~~lifeless~~ ^{lifeless} form, one at the head, the other at the
feet, and awkwardly carried it away to Joseph's private garden, ^{for burial}.
It isn't easy to be inconspicuous ^{doing this} / It is impossible to be dig-
nified, imperious, formidable. His colleagues must have thought
that he was balmy. ^{can hear them say...} ^{I envision them...} ("did you hear what
Nicodemus did? ^{I imagine this, said a snooty 1st c...} Claimed the corpse of that Nazarene trouble-
maker. ^{must} Some sight that would have been! ^{must have} Wouldn't you ~~love~~ ^{love to have}
~~loved to have been a range and~~ seen the two of them huffing and
puffing through the streets with a body on their hands?"
"Why, Nicodemus?" one of his colleagues finally asked.
"Why did you do it?" And Nicodemus may have answered something
like this... ^{I don't know why, really.} (I can't give you a simple

answer. | I suppose it has something to do with an incident that happened one night several years ago. | You remember when he was around here before, don't you? Teaching, healing, telling people that God expected more than obedience to the religious law and that God would give more than the law provided by way of happiness. | Well, I was intrigued by that. | Frankly, it sounded like something I had been thinking about for some time.

~~So I did something foolish. | This isn't the first time that I have acted uncharacteristically because of Jesus. But at least~~

~~I waited until after dark.~~ ^{So} I found out where he was staying, looked him up, and after dark knocked on the door. | We talked for a long time. | He said something about birth.... being born again, I think it was. | I asked about that, I remember. | I tried to be funny.... I said something foolish about a grown man and his mother's womb. | And ^{then} ~~there~~ the strangest thing happened.

A gust of wind blew down the chimney and the embers in the fire suddenly sprang to life. | You've seen that happen, haven't you? It's always a surprise. | (That's what I'm talking about, | Jesus

said -- rebirth -- like that unexpected gust of wind and the embers. coming to life. | God will surprise you like that -

" That experience turned out to be one of the most important in my life. | It helped me to see some things I've never seen before. | I thought I knew where God ^{was}. | I was content that the God of Abraham, Issac, Jacob, ^{the} God of Moses and David, could be located in the story of our people. | ~~and~~ I'm a Pharisee. | I love

and you must respond like the embers...

the law. | I love its orderliness, predictability, its logic and dignity. | The reality of God and his Kingdom had to do, ^{I thought,} with living that ancient, magnificent law. | But after that night I began to see God in unexpected places and I slowly concluded that his Kingdom both demanded and offered me much more than I ever thought possible. | In fact, and you'll have trouble with this, I know -- I claimed the dead body of Jesus of Nazareth because I have concluded that when ^{Jesus} ~~he~~ was talking to me, it was actually God encountering me. | Not a new God, ^{but} -- precisely the God of Abraham, the giver of the law. | That God spoke through this voice and lived through this man's life. | And I know you're thinking that I've completely lost my grip on reality -- but I'd rather have you think that I've been born again, like the embers responding to the wind....."

^{Academy} Twentieth century, assumptions about the whereabouts of God are not unlike Nicodemus's. | Those of us who frequent the church on Sunday morning may not be altogether mystical in our theology but we do believe that the reality of God has something to do with ^{the church} ~~our common life~~, the work we do together, the word we hear and the sacraments we celebrate. | ~~Those of us who frequent the church regularly~~ ^{we} may even be prepared to locate God in his mighty acts in the past. | We are willing to entertain the notion that when an ^{un}organized group of semitic slaves escaped from Egyptian ~~slavery~~, God had a hand in it. | We are willing to entertain the notion that when those slaves became a nation and

with Nicodemus,

exhibited a kind of public obsession with monotheism and justice,
God was involved. And, of course, we are willing to believe
that when Jesus of Nazareth rode into Jerusalem, got himself
crucified and then appeared to his disciples, God was more than
a little involved. We're willing, that is to say, to locate
God in grand, sweeping, historical phenomena, the more general
the better. ~~We have a bit of trouble with history which is
closer to home. In fact, as seems always to be the case with
history, the further away it is, the clearer we think we can
see.~~

We think, finally, that we can locate God in the mind: in
a brilliantly constructed argument, in a creed, in a persuasive
essay. ^{Presbyterians particularly} We think that the experience of God will happen to us
when the idea of God clicks in our minds. Therefore, some of
us spend a lot of time and energy doing theology. <sup>While some parts of the
church are holding revivals, the
Presbyterians are over at the library
trying to discuss
an historical
precedent,</sup>

Lately, however, some theologians are suggesting that we
are looking everywhere but the best place. In recent years
theology as narrative, theology as story, has become very pop-
ular. It means that God is located not just in his mighty acts
in history but in his not so mighty acts in your life and mine.

One of my favorite Christian thinkers is Frederick Buechner,
preacher, theologian, novelist. <sup>On the first page of his
latest book, The Sacred Journey, he suggests that...</sup>
~~I've been saying his latest
book, The Sacred Journey, for summer, and when I picked it up
last week this is what I found on the very first page..~~ ("all
theology, like all fiction, is at least autobiography.... what
a theologian is doing essentially is examining as honestly as

something
called

~~DA~~ Buechner, & many others like him.
-5- are suggesting that one's religious
pilgrimage is not entirely cerebral.

he can the rough-and-tumble of his own experience with all its
ups and downs, its mysteries and loose ends...."

Later ~~in the introduction~~, discussing the actuality of
God addressing us, Buechner writes.... "It seems to me that if
God speaks anywhere to us at all in this world, it is into our
personal lives ~~that he speaks~~.. Into the thick of it...at
moments of even the most humdrum of our days, ~~God speaks~~."

It's intriguing to consider that the raw material for your
search for God, your experience of God is not solely the
thinking of other people, however brilliant; not solely the
dramatic encounters of others, however eloquently described,
but the humdrum, mundane, common, day to day realities of your
own life. ("Who, me?") we are tempted to ask. Moses and God,
perhaps: Mary and God: Joan of Arc and God: Dietrich
Bonhoeffer and God: but surely not God and me!

a theologian who pioneered in the area of personal growth seminars
Revel Howe, ~~leading seminars on personal growth and dis-~~
~~cussion~~, used to ask participants to engage in an exercise
which was utterly fascinating, sometimes very difficult, but
always extremely helpful. Each was given a large sheet of
newsprint, a felt pen and told to spend several hours drawing
the floor plan of the first house in which he or she lived.
That accomplished, each was asked to locate in memory various
significant events and experiences, including those which might
be called theological. Every time it happens, people discover
that their own history, their own experience is far richer
than they ever understood.

Given the time in which to do it, & the means & the permission,
people identify Sunday School teachers, grandparents, moments sitting in church as
children, memories of parents, & critical family crises, & moments of high
joy & celebration. Invariably there is much more material seemingly waiting to

The late Carlile Marney, using a similar devise used to talk about the balcony on the building of your personality. The people on the balcony are your saints; the ones who introduced you to God.

It is not always an easy process for us. In fact, we are accustomed to perceiving ^{much of life a series of} reality as ~~an~~ experiences others have and then tell us about. We are almost locked into a way of thinking about God as an idea in the mind, and as soon as someone begins to expand the perimeters we become uncomfortable. ^{There} ~~There~~ ^{particularly when the perimeters begin to impinge on} ~~is, by the way, an entire division of academic philosophy~~ ^{our personal lives.} ~~called Phenomenology, which deals with these matters. It's~~ a hard word to pronounce, but I find it helpful when a philosophy observes -- "I happen to be constituted in such a way that watching a sunlit world, a tasty meal, the company of friends, listening to a brilliant discourse or beautiful music, and arriving at understanding are full of meaning for me." (The Christian Ministry, May, 1982, P. 15; Remy Kwant, "The Phenomenology of Language")

* That is to say there is more to human experience than that which happens inside the mind. And there is more to God's relationship with us than ideas about God which we are able to understand. A professor of Homiletics observes: "Preaching that does not engage the whole person is theologically incomplete."

We have to begin to think differently about God, ^(or, edit) ~~that is~~ ^{I submit,} ~~to say,~~ we have to cultivate the possibility that God may be

There is more to life, obviously, than the life of the mind. There is more to us as individuals than an intellect. And there is more to God than the ideas about God we are able to understand.

encountering us in a variety of ways other than our thought processes.

Art can help us in this regard. ~~this~~

Art helps us to experience the deeper significance of ordinary objects. University of Chicago Theologian Langdon Gilky, ~~was asked~~ to address ~~the~~ graduating students at the Art Institute in Chicago, and ~~he chose the occasion to speak~~ to the similarities between art and theology. He said, "The role of art (is) to make us see in different ways than before, below the surface and beyond the obvious. Art opens up truth hidden behind and within the ordinary." (Criterion, U. of C. Divinity School, Autumn, 1981)

I was privileged recently to stand before ^{an original} Monet, painting of a wooded glen with the faintest shadow of a church in the background. It is all pastel, shimmering almost, delicate. I never even saw the church until my host pointed it out. And I thought, how magnificent to be able to see ^{in the ordinary} what an artist sees. Monet saw and expressed the meaning-- the significance -- the beauty of that ^{ordinary} scenario which you and I would never notice. Gilky told the graduating students that "the importance of artists is not that they do anything useful. They say, 'stop, look and see what is real.'"

That is a word I would transpose into religion. "Stop - look - and see - what is real. See the presence of God in the ordinariness of your own life: see the creativity of God in the vitality of your own family; ~~see the suffering of God in the pathetic misery of the world's poor:~~ see the triumph

~~see the faithful caring of God in the loving parenting you received - or witnessed - or gave:~~

or in the way you see that strong
-8- affirmation made by friends who
very simply refuse to be defeated by death.

of God in the way you, yourself, keep affirming life in the
face of death.

Of course, it may be necessary to stop, in order to look
and listen. It may be that our religious experience is second-
hand because we've never taken the time to reflect on our own
story. The poets have always known that.

Listen to Emily Bronte:

"He comes with western winds, with evening's
wandering airs.

With that clear dusk of heaven that brings the
thickest stars.

But, first, a hush of peace, a soundless calm
descends

The struggle of distress and fierce impatience
ends:

Mute music soothes my breast."

(The Prisoner)

It is not easy for us to locate God in our own experience
because we are active, aggressive, busy, and it is not easy

because when God speaks we may not always like what we hear.

I had a grandfather who had refined to an art form the practice of selective hearing. He simply
didn't respond to most of the trivia happening under his nose. But one day when he wanted to
hear, his Capricorn miraculously returned. It is not an uncommon - or an unhappy malady.
word of the Lord when it is not what we want to hear. In fact,

experience in the Temple, after all, was not confined to a
wonderful encounter with the Almighty. The bottom line, as it
were, was a command. "Go," the voice said.

and it takes empty time, reflective time which many of us are
loath to give.

Finally, the process of listening to God is not easy

He comes to us both in the
-9- ordinariness + in the critical
extremes of life - to make common
cause with us, to stand with us.

God speaks, I would submit, in order to assure us that he exists, to comfort our sorrow and to heal our hurt. And Sometimes he speaks to us in order to tell us to do something. And sometimes telling us to do something is precisely the way he is trying to assure, comfort, heal and help us. There comes a time in post-crisis healing, whether the crisis is the death of a loved one, a divorce, a personal calamity, when the person simply has to reduce the amount of attention showered on self and begin to concentrate on someone or something else. An important corner in therapy is turned when another person, a cause, an organization begins to edge out the concern we have been lavishing on self. I think God is in that. And I think it can be very difficult for us to acknowledge it.

Nicodemus was shown a new way of being by Jesus Christ. It began when he saw that God's presence in his own life was as dynamic, ^{as} unexpected and unpredictable, as the wind. His new birth proceeded, as he learned to stop and look and listen to his own experience.

The Gospel is the good news that God is in life: that he has been a dynamic force in your own life: that he is today, a power at work, a creative potential, an unseen presence.

Look for him in your story. Locate him in your own experience. Celebrate him there. ~~And sing with new intent the good words of an old hymn~~

See if your life does not testify to
the truth captured in a great
old hymn.

I believe God

"Praise ye the Lord, who o'er all things
so wondrously reigneth
Shelters thee under his wings, yea, so
gently sustaineth.
Hast thou not seen, How thy desires
have been
Granted in what he ordaineth."

AMEN

Lord of life, we praise you for your presence, hidden in the
ordinariness of our lives; ~~yet sometimes~~
Give us minds to know you, hearts to love you and voices to
sing your praise; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN